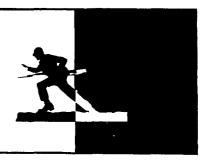
## INFANTRY LETTERS



## NEW LEADER MEETS THE MEN: SERGEANT HOUSTON WILSON, PLATOON MEDIC—KOREA 1952

Sergeant Volkmar met me just outside the entrance to the command bunker of the first platoon, B Company, 14th Infantry Regiment, when I arrived to replace First Lieutenant Alwin Oar, a highly regarded former platoon leader recently promoted to company executive officer. He had already left the platoon in Mundung-ni Valley and moved up to the company command post with Captain Jim Martin on Heartbreak Ridge. Sergeant Volkmar was the platoon sergeant, but he would soon be returning home to Ohio under the Army's rotation system.

Inside the bunker I was introduced to the other four inhabitants of the log-andsandbag architectural masterpiece that was to be my new home away from home. Structurally, the bunker was sound. Aesthetically, it lacked a lot. The interior was dark and dank, but that was not surprising since the only source of natural light was from the narrow entrance. Sergeant Thomas was from California. Sergeant Richard, the assistant platoon sergeant, was from Illinois, and Private Orr, the radioman, was from Missouri. And from The Great Commonwealth of Virginia, there was Sergeant Wilson-Houston Wilson-the platoon medic. When God finished creating "Doc" Wilson he shredded the pattern. Wilson was one of a kind. Native to the beautiful rolling slopes of southwest Virginia, he was an irrepressible rebel and model of nonconformity.

I have no idea how much the Army spent in money and man-hours trying to forge each soldier into a controlled discipline of dress, behavior, and mind-set. But there were always a few who failed to get the word. In a pejorative sense, the old regular Army NCOs called them "individuals." "Doc" Wilson was a classic example of what they were talking about, and he was an individual par excellence.

Physically he wasn't very imposing, slim and lanky. His most distinctive feature was a receding chin which gave him an appearance of weakness. As time went by, however, I would learn that his looks belied his courage when the chips were down. Individuals can be amazingly adroit when it comes to straddling the fragile line that separates conformity from nonconformity. Wilson had an uncanny knack for obliterating it altogether.

My arrival kindled one of the most awkward situations known to mankind—the change of command in a small combat unit. The severity of the circumstance is exponentially sensitized by its proximity to hostile forces along forward battle lines. In other words, the closer you are to the enemy the worse it gets. This sudden relationship between a new leader and the men he is to lead bears heavily upon all concerned. Serious consequences ride on it. Survival comes to mind. Both sides look for signals. It isn't a democratic process: it's more like a game of chance. Each player assesses his draw quickly. The gold bar of a second lieutenant and the crossed sabers of cavalry on my collar did not emit a very comforting message to the men-a silver bar and crossed rifles of infantry would have been far more reassuring. From my own perspective, they had been on the line long enough to take on a rather haggard look that gave them an appearance of something less than elite troops. But you play the cards you are dealt, and these men were my best-and only-hand.

The matchmaking itself was an impersonal affair made far from heaven. Somewhere deep in the hollows of a

rear echelon headquarters, seated in a pyramidal tent pitched high on a Godforsaken Korean mountaintop, a unit clerk wearily types a name in a blank space on an organization chart. Nothing emotional about it. Nothing scientific (out of Infantry officers?..Substitute an Armor officer).

So, as I put away my few possessions (known as "personal effects" when you are killed) in an old K-ration crate wedged into the sandbag wall, an understandable pall descended. When I turned to face the men I would soon depend upon so heavily, bits of small talk began to emerge, but it was too much like having a wisdom tooth pulled without novocaine. A very slow and very painful extraction.

It wasn't long, however, until we were interrupted by the depressing whine and crump of incoming artillery fire. Enemy artillery has a way of grabbing everybody's attention, and it was coming in pretty close to our bunker. Without hesitation, Doc Wilson began to take remedial action. He launched into a loud and soulful prayer that seemed to me to be bordering on sacri-Maybe God could tell, but I couldn't. "Dear Lord," he intoned, "you are letting that stuff get awfully close-in on us. Would you mind moving it over a little bit? We're not asking much." The shelling miraculously shifted several yards away, and Wilson quickly expressed his gratitude for the adjustment. I assumed communication at this celestial level was not unusual since the other occupants seemed unconcerned about it and gave me only an occasional glance. Even so, I couldn't help cringing as I secretly hoped the Lord would consider that I had only been there about 30 minutes and really hadn't had time to take over yet. After all, I was an infantryman by sudden decree, not by experience or training, so I certainly had no desire to take on the North Koreans, the Red Chinese, and the wrath of God, all at the same time.

Following further ethereal exchanges, negotiating an acceptable impact zone, the artillery finally subsided—but not Sergeant Wilson. He merely shifted the course of his dialogue and continued: "Dear Lord, you have seen fit to send us a brand new second lieutenant today and we thank you for that. But please, Lord, let us keep this one awhile. You know you haven't let us keep second lieutenants very long and this one seems like a nice man and we think we would like to keep him." Wilson now had the full attention of everybody else within the narrow confines of our quarters. Then, after several more minutes of expostulation on the unreasonable brevity of front-line infantry second-lieutenant longevity, he abruptly ended his supplication: "And Dear Lord...Rotate me!" In GI terminology that meant send me home.

Suddenly the bunker was quiet. Sergeant Thomas was looking at me. His expression, I'm sure, reflected that of the others, which I could feel but couldn't see. His eyebrows were twisted in anxious concern. I don't think he was breathing. But when I grinned and slowly shook my head from side to side, laughter erupted in the bunker and the anxiety of our initial meeting, which had consumed us all, evaporated. The ice was broken. I hope God smiled too...and I think he did, because not so much as one round of enemy artillery ever fell directly on our bunker for as long as we remained in the Valley.

Was Sergeant Wilson testing me? Was he saying, "Here's your chance, Buster; you can take the ball and run with it, or you can drop it—the choice is yours"?

I didn't ask. He didn't say.

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## THINKING ABOUT FUTURE URBAN COMBAT

Working in the Infantry School's Doctrine Division, I have been the subject matter expert on military operations on urban terrain (MOUT) for about ten years. During that time, I have studied what has been written about urban combat and noncombat military operations in cities. I have listened to many officers talk and write about MOUT, both at the Infantry School and in other forums. What I have heard and seen sometimes disturbs me.

As an Army and as a branch, we must avoid the temptation to view future urban combat as solely small-scale, SWAT-type operations. While some such operations can be concluded quickly, neatly, and cleanly, with few or no friendly casualties, and with little damage to the surrounding area, wars of the past 60 years have shown the reality of the MOUT fight to be anything but a surgical strike.

Underestimating the extent of MOUT commitment is dangerous, because it blinds us to the possibility that higher levels of combat may be called for. History shows us that we seldom have been able to dictate the course of events in urban combat, and that the enemy too often gets his vote as to how large or small a combat operation will become.

The most striking thing about urban combat is that it has not changed much over the years. We may want it to change. We may wish that it would change. We may think that it will change. But somehow, in spite of all our efforts, urban combat always comes down to the same thing—a series of relatively small, somewhat connected but separate, vicious, deadly, destructive gunfights.

At times, these fights will coalesce, grow, and swirl wildly out of control. At other times, they will sputter to an inconclusive finish, leaving both sides exhausted and uncertain of the next step. Sometimes, they will blend into a coherent theme that one side or the other can take advantage of and thereby win a decisive victory.

In many ways, tank engagements, sea battles, aerial dogfights, and even Infantry combat on most other terrain, is much different today from the way it was 50 years ago. This is not true of battles in the city. The Infantry and Armor veterans of Aachen, Manila, Seoul, Hue, and Mogadishu all share a surprisingly common experience.

Another striking thing I have observed is how little influence modern technology has on the course and outcome of urban battles at the tactical level. That is not to say it has no influence, just that no matter what technology gap exists between the two sides initially, they are much more closely matched in an urban area. This is not true anywhere else, except perhaps dense jungle, a setting that shares many of the aspects of urban combat, lacking only the third dimension afforded by multi-story buildings.

In the urban battle, small-unit training, cohesion, endurance, leadership, imagination, and dedication compensate to a great degree for lack of sophistication and technological advances.

Who, in the post-war drawdown of 1947, would have predicted a division-sized assault to retake Seoul just three years later? Who, in the guerrilla war focus of 1965, would have been able to predict the vicious street-to-street fighting for the Citadel of Hue in just three years? These were as implausible as someone predicting that, in 1987, a half million American soldiers would be sweeping across the desert toward the Euphrates only three years later.

Small urban battles can flare out of control quickly. We must always count their economic, cultural, societal, psychological, and political implications, often above purely military considerations. This is especially true if we are engaged in a struggle with nonsovereign entities, which are predicted to be more common in the future.

We must be very careful not to give our combat arms soldiers the idea that all future urban combat at the tactical level will more closely resemble police SWAT team operations than the combat our fathers saw in Germany and the Philippines. We cannot predict that with any certainty, and we may well be wrong.

Unfortunately, I think many leaders

and most young soldiers in the Army today think that high-intensity combat in cities is a thing of the past. If we couple that belief with unreasonable assumptions that U.S. forces cannot or will not accept high casualty rates, and that battles can be fought in densely populated areas without damaging much of the city or hurting many noncombatants, I think we have a prescription for disaster.

I am certainly not predicting tactical defeat, but what I fear is the tremendous surprise and intense psychological shock to both leaders and soldiers as the realities of the urban battle unfold. This shock may be so profound that it could render all pre-battle staff analysis worthless and cast senior leaders mentally adrift, without a vision of how to impose their will on the situation and regain the initiative.

In World War I, the killing power of the machinegun and modern artillery had a profound psychological effect on senior leaders. It generated a mental retrenchment and determination to make the attack succeed by sheer force of will. Such rigidity of thought and lack of vision made intelligent men with solid military backgrounds do incredibly stupid things that result in horrific casualties without any successful results.

I think we are negligent if we do not teach our young infantry officers several truths about urban combat:

Urban combat in the future may be small scale, but it just as well could be large scale. We cannot predict very well. An operation may start out small and then, for reasons beyond the control of soldiers or leaders at the tactical level, turn into a large-scale battle. We have to be ready for whatever could happen, not for what we hope will happen.

Urban combat will involve casualties—theirs, ours, and others. We must neither shrink from it nor glory in it. We must plan for it. To do otherwise will be disastrous. Giving our potential enemies the impression we have no stomach for U.S. casualties will only increase the probability of suffering them.

Because we want to reduce unnecessary collateral damage, we train hard for battle at very close quarters. I think,

however, that by day three of a real battle our soldiers simply won't be going into rooms that they know are filled with enemy troops without doing everything they can to kill those troops first. They will use all the grenades, demolitions, tank fire, artillery, and bombs they can get—and call for more.

We must come to accept the fact that if the Nation sends its Infantry into a city to fight, horrible photographs and video footage will come out. As soldiers, we can only trust in our leaders, remain true to our oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, obey all legal orders, and pray that in the final reckoning, the ends justify the means.

Limiting collateral damage is a relative thing and, in and of itself, should not be the objective of a military operation. Urban combat equals damage and destruction. There is no way to get around that. You cannot have a neat and tidy fight in an urban area.

In fact, even the term collateral damage is vague. There is a significant difference between damage done to a building the enemy is using as a defended position and that done to all the unoccupied buildings in the general vicinity.

Generally, under the Geneva Accords, combatants are allowed to concentrate as much firepower and destructive force as is required to eliminate a defended position. At the same time, we hold commanders responsible for limiting, to the best of their ability, unnecessary damage to surrounding areas that are not defended. For political or military reasons, higher commanders may impose further limits on the firepower they authorize their subordinates to use against enemy positions, in order to limit damage to surrounding areas.

Although we can only do so much to limit damage during an urban battle, one of the amazing things about modern cities is the resiliency of their infrastructure. Today, Beirut is once again a beautiful place, even though it was subjected to days and days of concentrated tank, artillery, and aerial bombardment by the Israelis and, before

that, was rocked by powerful car bombs and mortar fire almost every day.

If we allow our soldiers and leaders to harbor the expectation that they can fight in a city and contain damage to just a few places, when that is shown to be false, what concept do we have to give them to replace it? Do they fall back on total destruction, the Russian solution in Grozny? I hope not.

Rules of engagement (ROEs) can change in the blink of an eye. We must not place too much emphasis on detailed, formal, written ROEs. We must teach leaders to think, to consider the on-scene situation, and to make decisions based on general guidelines we have established. We must avoid having leaders who always consult a written checklist of ROEs before they act and would never think to modify that list as the situation changes.

We must get leaders to understand that U.S. troops are always operating under some set of ROEs, even if we have not written them down. We derive these ROEs from the Law of Land Warfare, U.S. civil and military code, U.S. national objectives, and the senior commander's evaluation of the specific political and military aspects of the These rules may become situation. more or less restrictive as the situation changes, but they are always there. It is more important that we provide young leaders with an understanding of how to decide whether a specific act is appropriate than it is to provide them with a written set of rules.

Urban combat is not an Infantryonly mission. Just as the combined arms team is the right answer to tactical problems on all other terrain, so it is in urban areas. The precise composition of the team might change, with varying proportions of armored vehicles, engineers, aviation, and artillery, but tactical success demands the same type of teamwork. We must teach soldiers and leaders at all levels that a combined arms team wins in the city, and that single-branch operations either lose or win, only at a much greater cost in lives and time.

We forgot that truth in Somalia, and had to re-create the Infantry-Armor combined arms team at night, under fire, without a plan, and with allies who spoke little English. It is a credit to the soldiering skills and fighting spirit of the Infantry, Aviation, and Special Operations forces involved that they were able to hold out until that ad hoc combined arms team could come together. When it did, the issue was decided.

I hope that we can do something about problems of this kind, through both doctrine and instruction.

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## ON-VEHICLE LADDER NEEDED FOR LAV III

I have studied the capabilities of the new light armored vehicle (LAV) III infantry carrier, and it appears to me that it is lacking a beneficial piece of onvehicle equipment. Various Army studies and reports have identified the need for infantry forces to fight more effectively on urban terrain, an environment that is expected to become the most common battlefield. Since the LAV-equipped brigade combat teams will no doubt operate in this environment, it would be beneficial to provide the infantry carrier with a simple and low-cost piece of equipment that would greatly improve the infantryman's capabilities during military operations on urban terrain, and on other terrain as well

A standard commercial 20-foot aluminum extension ladder (approximately 10 feet long when retracted) can be strapped to the side of the LAV III to give infantrymen an invaluable aid to mounting obstacle and crossing gaps. The LAV III hull is 6.51 feet high, and if it were pulled up hard against the side of a building, an infantryman might be able to stand on it to gain entry through a second floor window. But a vehicle cannot always get that close to a building and in many parts of the world, building floors are 10 feet or higher. A 20-foot extension ladder on the ground would allow access to some secondfloor windows. Set atop a LAV III and braced against a hatch, the ladder would allow entry through third-floor windows, even if the vehicle were a couple of meters from the building.

Some might suggest that the tactical caving ladder, a single telescoping pole with rungs attached, might be used, but a two-sidebar extension ladder would be more versatile. The extension ladder is strong, low-cost, and extremely light. It can easily be carried and emplaced by one man. A ladder with two sidebars can be used for crossing gaps of 16 to 18 feet, between buildings or across gullies and steep-banked streams. This

is important since the LAV III can cross only a 6.5-foot gap.

The ladder can also be used to scale high walls, fences, and barbed wire obstacles and as an aid in clearing telephone and non-charged power lines. It is extremely difficult to use the cavingtype ladder to climb chain-link fences topped with angle barbed wire on outriggers. A two-sidebar ladder can surmount such an obstacle easily and can be pushed under concertina coils, lifted up, and propped in place with stakes or short barbed wire pickets to provide a tunnel under the obstacle. This ladder also makes hauling heavy items such as crew-served weapons and ammunition through windows easier than the singlepole, caving-type ladder hanging free from a window sill. It is also a more effective way to evacuate casualties than a caving-type ladder.

The simple addition of a lightweight, already proven, and readily available 20-foot extension ladder to LAV III infantry carriers, reconnaissance, and engineer variants will provide a low-cost, low-tech means of significantly enhancing the mobility and capabilities of the dismounted infantryman.

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